

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
OFFICE OF MARINE SAFETY

In the Matter of:

"FIRE ON BOARD M/V COLUMBIA"

Date of Fire: June 6, 2000

Docket No.:
DCA00MM030

Recorded Interview JOHN A. MCMAHON.

Onboard M/V COLUMBIA

Interviewed in the DINNING ROOM
Moored at Auke Bay
Alaska Marine Highway System
Marine Terminal North of
Juneau, Alaska

June 9, 2000 (Friday)

BEFORE:

ANTHONY MURRAY
Marine Accident Investigator
NTSB Operations Group Chairman

LIEUTENANT JAMES BARLETT
US Coast Guard, Marine Safety Office
Juneau, Alaska

CAPTAIN NORM EDWARDS
Vessel Operations Manager
State of Alaska Marine Highway System

TABLE OF CONTENTS

WITNESS:

PAGE

J.A. McMahon

3

P R O C E E D I N G S

(4:15 p.m.)

MR. MURRAY: ... NTSB on board the motor vessel, Columbia. And we are about to interview the Pilot, Mr. John A. McMahon. Last named is spelled capital M, small c, capital M-a-h-o-n. And he's the pilot on board the motor vessel Columbia. Today is June 9, year 2000, Friday.

And we'll begin the interview now.

E X A M I N A T I O N

BY MR. MURRAY:

Q Pilot McMahon, if you would give us a little bit about your background, maritime-wise, and then give us a narration of the incidents that happened on Tuesday, June 6.

A I started with the Marine Highways, well, May of '74. And I worked in the Steward's Department for, oh, five years; got on the Deck Department; got my AB ticket. And I got my license ten years ago -- eleven years. Well, 1988, May of '88. Twelve.

And I worked my way from Third Mate, Second mate, Relief Chief Mate. And this was my first trip as Pilot. The pilot position actually oversees the 12 to 6 watch and normally was the person in the pretty much new hire as 3rd mate.

1 And they and sometimes do not have a pilot's
2 license but most of them do when they get hired in that
3 spot. But, if they don't, they'll be put there also.
4 And you oversee the watch and make sure -- you bring
5 them along, bring them up to speed as 3rd mate because
6 usually they're just starting out.

7 So you want me to start with the incidence,
8 the day that...?

9 Q Okay. I just had a question of the 12-6
10 watch. Who is your opposite then on the 6-12 watch
11 with the license?

12 A The 2nd mate.

13 Q Okay. And then if you'll give us a narrative
14 of the incidents that happened on Tuesday.

15 A Well, first, about 1205 or a few minutes
16 before the incident, we saw a contact on the radar
17 about eight miles ahead of us. We couldn't -- we
18 didn't see it visibly. We saw it in the radar because
19 the visibility was less than eight miles. Between five
20 and eight miles, the visibility that day.

21 And I saw right after I plotted the vessel,
22 or the target, I saw what kind of speed it was making
23 and I right away saw it was 16 knots or so. And I
24 thought, well, maybe that's one of our ferries.

25 So I look at the schedule and, sure enough,

1 the Taku had left Sitka and was northbound. I figured,
2 well, that's about where it would be.

3 So, anyway, I called. I had the 3rd mate
4 call on the radio and ask; the northbound vessel was
5 eight miles ahead of us, that we were off North Passage
6 Point. And the Taku came back.

7 And I'm not sure which channel she was on
8 after that, if she went down to 13 or -- we monitored
9 channel 11. The terminals do ann the ship when we're
10 up this end of the run.

11 But, anyway, Taku came back and she talked to
12 him. I said, "We see you red to red," and they agreed.
13 Okay.

14 So then just a few minutes after that, the
15 Engine Order Telegraph Failure Alarm back in the port
16 bulkhead back there sounded off very loud. And my
17 radar went out at the same time.

18 And as I turned to see what that alarm was
19 and went to silence it or see what it was, the Captain
20 came running in just at that instant.

21 He came to the com and looked. You know,
22 whatever he was looking for there, he saw that we had
23 lost pitch and the ship was starting to... starting to
24 lose headway.

25 Well, I came back and I mentioned that we had

1 seen the Taku and we had made arrangements. So I in
2 the meantime got on the radio and told the Taku that,
3 well, "Give us a wide berth. We have a problem over
4 here."

5 So they agreed to do that. In the meantime,
6 the captain saw that the ship was dead, you know, had
7 lost power. So he went -- he got a phone call I
8 believe that time. I'm not really sure when he got
9 that call because I was talking to Taku. He was on the
10 phone and hung up and he went back and said there was a
11 fire in the engine room.

12 So he went back and was making an
13 announcement to that effect. I ran out in the meantime
14 to get the fire plan. And when I came back in, he was
15 talking to passengers saying -- and the general alarm
16 was sounding -- he said to the passengers, making his
17 announcement, you know, "This is the Captain," in a
18 calm voice. He said, "We have a fire and we'll keep
19 you up to date." Or whatever. I forget the exact
20 words, what he said.

21 And, okay, from there I put the fire plans on
22 the chart desk and went back up to man the radios
23 because in my position, I'm recording my station but I
24 of course will assist the captain on the bridge.

25 So that's what I did. I stood by the radio.

1 And let's see. I'm going to look over at my notes
2 here.

3 Q Sure. Feel free.

4 A And after I saw the Taku, they gave us a wide
5 berth -- let me back up a little bit. I noticed the
6 pitch had gone to zero. Not reversed but it was just
7 zero, okay. So we had no pitch... they flared back or
8 whatever they do but there just was no picture on them.

9 Okay. And then as Captain saw us, assessed
10 the problem, he had told me to call back the Taku and
11 tell them to stand by, if she would, that we have a
12 problem here. We may need them to assist us.

13 And when we made that -- when I made that
14 radio call, the Anacapa called and said -- I believe
15 they said they were four miles away, that they would be
16 here. They would be standing by also.

17 So we figured at that point the Coast Guard
18 had been contacted, basically, because they knew.

19 So, after the captain had made his
20 announcement to the passengers, I just really just
21 stood by the radios and was answering whatever incoming
22 radio transmissions we had or were sending them out.

23 In-between all of that, I was trying to
24 silence alarms. You had a lot of alarms going on the
25 bridge. We kept silencing them and they kept ringing.

1 One of them we couldn't find. It sounded like it was
2 one spot on the bridge, but it wasn't.

3 It was completely different, another spot,
4 opposite spot of what we thought. We couldn't find it
5 for a while and I was kind of annoyed. The captain
6 kept saying, "Where's that one?" We could not find?
7 We eventually did.

8 So, in the meantime, the 3rd mate went down
9 to the scene of the fire. And I pretty much assisted
10 answering radio calls. The captain a little bit later,
11 maybe it was about -- whatever -- 1215 maybe, 1220 --
12 had called the office.

13 I remember him on the cell phone calling the
14 office, and letting them know we had a problem here.
15 And in the meantime I was thinking of plotting the
16 ship, so I had the Taku, since our radars were out,
17 down, we didn't have the time to start plotting my
18 bearings so I told the Taku if they can give us our
19 longitude/latitude and then I could go ahead and plot.

20 So they did. And I took the coordinates and
21 plotted ourselves on the chart there.. I determined
22 that we were in good water. We were still pretty close
23 to where we were when we lost power.

24 So we were three miles from the beach on one
25 side, the North Passage points, I remember pretty much

1 three miles from the beach on the Admiralty Island
2 side. So we were pretty much in the center of that
3 Channel at that point.

4 I also went to the Rules of the Road book and
5 saw what the day shapes were for a ship that's not
6 under command or had no power. So we instructed the
7 watchman at that time to get the two black balls up,
8 put them up to show that shape.

9 So I secured our running lights at that time
10 and our mast lights.

11 About a half hour after all this started,
12 Fred Montes, which is the Captain on the Leconte, he
13 was dead-heading on the ship. He was traveling on the
14 vessel. He came on the bridge and started to assist
15 also.

16 And so he also plotted the ship where it was.
17 He got the same coordinates to make sure they were
18 correct. And everything was fine.

19 And we called -- by the time he got there, we
20 had called the Taku. I called the Taku one more time,
21 which was about 15 minutes after I called him the first
22 time to get more coordinates, and he did.

23 And then Fred was up there. So he plotted
24 that while I was monitoring the radios. And then in
25 the meantime we called the Anacapa asking what kind of

1 assistance can they lend.

2 The Taku is saying, you know, "We have men
3 over here and other fire-fighting equipment if you
4 need. And the Captain said, "Okay, tell them we're
5 going to send our equipment over," and they did.

6 And the captain told us that they don't have
7 the breathing apparatus like we do. That's CBAs. They
8 have the OBAs. So I said, well, no. So they brought
9 that.

10 They brought I believe four crew members on
11 board to help fight the fire. I think that was the
12 number. And they also told us that they have a helo en
13 route from Sitka with two fire-fighters on it.

14 So we knew that was on the way also.

15 We have the OP book up there which shows you
16 the steps you take for different scenarios. And this
17 one, I opened up the fire and explosion. I forget, OP,
18 whatever the number was, 1.1 or 2.2. And I went over
19 the checklist to see what was being done.

20 And the captain had shut the fire screen
21 door. So everything, you know, was pretty much in
22 order. And the only thing I saw which we didn't do,
23 which I brought to his attention, is that we have to
24 secure the fuel, turn that off.

25 And the captain called the chief engineer and

1 I believe at that time they said, "We're doing that
2 right now." So they were taking care of that.

3 And, other than that, I pretty much just
4 monitored radios and just helping out where I could
5 there. That's pretty much I brought you up to the
6 situation where the Taku came along.

7 So then we started preparing to take
8 passengers off.

9 MR. MURRAY: All right. Thank you, Mr.
10 McMahon. Just a couple of questions that I would have.

11 BY MR. MURRAY:

12 Q This other personnel up on the bridge, would
13 that include a quartermaster? And would you have a
14 lookout on the bridge?

15 A Oh, you're talking in this situation or
16 normally?

17 Q Yes, on this situation.

18 A Well, the quartermaster, their helmsman, was
19 there, but he was released and he went to his fire
20 station.

21 Q Okay.

22 A Now there is something on the station bill
23 that says that someone's duty is to come to the wheel.

24 But there wasn't someone on the wheel at that time.
25 We were dead in the water and, although we still had

1 steering, we still were dead in the water.

2 So you would be almost taking up an able body
3 to stand by. We did have a watchman though up on the
4 bridge. He assisted in a lot of things. Like I said,
5 putting up the day shapes and going to see if the stack
6 was hot because the captain thought maybe it was a
7 stack fire. So he went up there and checked that.

8 So there was a sailor there assisting us
9 pretty much, yes.

10 Q So just to summarize this situation, you're
11 there to help the captain with communications, keeping
12 the captain informed of the position of the ship and
13 just helping coordinate the emergency procedures?

14 A Correct.

15 MR. MURRAY: All right. Thank you. I don't
16 have any further questions. If anyone else has any?

17 CAPTAIN BRERETON: Do you remember me having
18 the general alarm set?

19 ANSWER: Yes.

20 QUESTION: I didn't get it. Maybe you did.

21 MR. MURRAY: Is there anything else you would
22 like to add for this investigation that may help our
23 investigation to help the situation like this in the
24 future?

25 MR. MCMAHON: Well, two things, the

1 evacuation process. We have -- now I believe -- I'm on
2 the radio and I'm just kind of getting in my mind
3 what's going on down there. But they had one way off.

4 They were going down, I believe they were
5 using the port forward stairwell, which is a real wide
6 stairwell the passengers use.

7 And they evacuated some of the handicapped or
8 more elderly people first. And being up on the bridge
9 and watching the gang way down there between the two
10 ships and seeing no one for five minutes, you know, at
11 a time getting off the ship, I thought that wasn't --

12 CAPTAIN BRERETON: It seemed like forever.

13 MR. MCMAHON: It seemed like forever. And I
14 thought, gees, you either have two different ways to go
15 down or something.

16 When I found out later that the square of the
17 ship, the forward part of the ship where the part I
18 told you about was empty.

19 They could have used two other stairwells
20 forward to come down. Those are the ones usually the
21 crew uses. The more healthy, or younger, whatever,
22 could come down those stairwells.

23 And maybe the elderly or the more handicapped
24 could have used the wider stairwells, which is the one
25 the passengers normally use.

1 I think that would have expedited it quite a
2 bit.

3 The other thing, there's a space on the car
4 deck that's painted yellow. It's right in front of the
5 gear locker. And there was a car parked on that. And
6 there shouldn't have been one there.

7 That should always be left empty because in
8 case -- engineers have chewed me out because I've done
9 the same thing. And if you park it there, halfway on
10 the yellow, no, they won't -- but there's the reason
11 why they shouldn't be.

12 So I've done it, too. And I mean any chief
13 says he hasn't, I don't know. I think he could be
14 lying. But a car was parked right there in front of a
15 gear locker. And it hindered the fire-fighting team
16 from moving in and out of the gear locker and into the
17 engine room.

18 BY MR. MURRAY:

19 Q And you felt this also prevented access to
20 the gear locker?

21 A Well, there's an emergency gear locker right
22 there.

23 It didn't prevent it but it hampered it?

24 Q Hampered it. Okay.

25 A Is that going between a car in a bulkhead a

1 car in a van or a car in a bulkhead to get through, and
2 they have these big tanks on.

3 So I just, you know, the engineers always
4 push, "Don't park there. Don't park." Well, not
5 there. I mean keep this a space.

6 Normally, we do but they had a pretty good-
7 sized load and they just parked their car in the way.

8 MR. MURRAY: All right. That's a good point.
9 I'm glad you made that.

10 Okay, I don't have any further questions.
11 Thank you very much for this interview.

12 (TAPE CONCLUDED.)